

UCLA Diversifying the Classics: Gender and the Comedia



L to R: Christine McLennan, Mimi Robinson, and Natalie Pernick in UVA Drama's production of Dave Dalton's *Love's a Bitch*, an adaptation of *Don Gil of the Green Breeches*. Photo by Michael Bailey.

The Spanish comedia of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was a truly popular art, enjoyed by audiences from all parts of society in public playhouses known as *corrales*. The comedia reflected this large and varied audience on stage, with plots that often examined and questioned social hierarchies. Female theatergoers, for example, could see themselves represented in plays that took up gender roles in surprising ways.

Attending a play was in itself a break from societal norms. Although the authorities tried to keep male and female theatergoers separate, the *corrales* were spaces of unprecedented mixing between the genders, with young people going to see and be seen by potential lovers, as well as admirers and paramours coming to watch famous actresses.

Actresses were hugely important within the comedia. They were the biggest stars and, in fact, out-earned their male counterparts. For actors accustomed to the Shakespearean canon, in which female roles were originally played by boy actors, it is particularly exciting to discover the wonderful variety of female roles written for these renowned divas.

The powerful roles that actresses played onstage often portrayed the force of female desire. Women in these plays pursue lovers, defy fathers, outwit rivals, and sometimes even take up swords and act as men. Outraged moralists periodically decried the subversive power of these depictions on stage, which challenged gender norms. Nonetheless, their popularity was unstoppable.

When they impersonated men, cross-dressing protagonists highlighted the societal limitations on women and the instability of the supposedly rigid gender binary. In Tirso de Molina's *Don Gil of the Green Breeches*, Juana dresses up as the titular Don Gil and seduces all the women in the play with her dashing costume and quick wit. In Ana Caro's *The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs*, Leonor takes her destiny into her own hands when she adopts a male persona to exact revenge on her delinquent lover. Along the way, she shows herself to be a better "man" than any of the hapless males around her. In Guillén de Castro's *The Force of Habit*, Hipólita goes one step further and lives as a man for 20 years, even becoming a celebrated soldier. And in *The Mountain Girl from La Vera*, Luis Vélez de Guevara's theatrical adaptation of a medieval folktale, Gila is a mountain woman who expresses queer desire, vows revenge against all men after being seduced, and finally meets a tragic end, unreconciled to traditional femininity.

As with recent trends in Shakespearean casting, productions of comedia can also explore the gender dynamics of the plays through gender-swapped roles. A well-received 2012 production of Calderón de la Barca's *Life Is a Dream*, directed by Helena Pimenta for the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico, featured actress Blanca Portillo in the central role of Prince Segismundo, one of the most famous roles in the comedia canon.

Adapted, gender-swapped, or traditional, the more than ten thousand surviving comedias offer a space for gender play that engages seriously with questions as important today as they were four hundred years ago.

Resources:

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Boyle, Margaret. "'Create an Unexpected Context': A Conversation about Adaptation and Performance with Playwright Dave Dalton." *Comedia Performance* vol. 15, no. 1 (2018): 86-92.

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Connor Swietlicki, Catherine. "Marriage and Subversion in Comedia Endings: Problems in Art and Society." In *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*, eds. Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2000. 23-46.

García-Reidy, Alejandro. "Celebrities and the Stage: Theatrical Stardom in Early Modern Spain." *Renaissance Studies* vol. 32, no. 2 (2016): 1-19.